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ABSTRACT

Gilligan's theory, which identifies two distinct orientations of moral decision-making, care and justice, was extended in this study. Moral dilemmas were used to ascertain percentages of care-based responses versus justice-based responses in 40 men and 39 women. Based on previous research, it was predicted that by increasing the level of importance of a given situation and the degree of difficulty in reaching a decision, one would find significant increases in percentages of total care responses in both men and women. It was also predicted that in decisions of lesser importance, men would tend to rely on a justice orientation while women would operate more from a care orientation. Results yielded support for all but the latter of these predictions. These findings deviate somewhat from predictions based on Gilligan's theory that these orientations are predominantly sex-specific. Thus it is clear that the two orientations do in fact exist, but it is less clear under what circumstances sex differences may exist. Further research that focuses on situational differences and their relation to the responses of men and women is needed to clarify this issue. (References are included.) (Author)

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Sex Differences in Moral Decision Making

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Abstract

Gilligan's theory, which identifies two distinct orientations of moral decision-making, care and justice, was extended in this study. Moral dilemmas were used to ascertain percentages of care-based responses versus justice-based responses in men and women. Based on previous research, it was predicted that by increasing the level of importance of a given situation and the degree of difficulty in reaching a decision, one would find significant increases in percentages of total care responses in both men and women. It was also predicted that in decisions of lesser importance, men would tend to rely on a justice orientation while women would operate more from a care orientation. Results yielded support for all but the latter of these predcitions. These findings deviate somewhat from predictions based on Gilligan's theory that these orientations are predominantly sex-specific. Thus, it is clear that the two orientations do in fact exist, but it is less clear under what circumstances sex differences may exist. Further research that focuses on situational differences and their relation to the responses of men and women is needed to clarify the issue.

Sex Differences in Moral Decision Making

Sex differences have been an important area of consideration in most lines of psychological research and the area of human judgment and decision making is no exception. More specifically, conclusions addressing differences that may (or may not) exist in the realm of moral decision making have been extremely inconsistent and controversial (Walker, 1984).

Early researchers such as Piaget (1932) have noted the existence of two different types of morality, a morality of good and a morality of right or duty. Kohlberg & Kramer (1969), working within Piaget's moral development theories, proposed a universal, invariant sequence of moral development which classified this morality of good at a developmentally inferior level to the morality of right or duty. Kohlberg (1971) argued that justice is the basic moral principle, or the one from which humans must strive to operate in order to exist as functionally mature individuals. It is with this generalization that many researchers have taken issue. In particular, Kohlberg's failure to include the morality of good parallel to the morality of justice has been criticized (Bussey & Maughan, 1982; Murphy & Gilligan, 1982; Reimer, 1983).

Perhaps the most outspoken and renowned of the opponents is Carol Gilligan. Gilligan (1982) publicized her substantial differences in In A Different Voice. Her criticisms stem from the fact that Kohlberg based his theories on research he conducted using an all-male sample. She believes it is senseless to try to fit women into a sex-biased theory. The logic of her argument is that women are socialized to be caring, empathic, and sensitive to the needs of others. The woman's place in the man's life cycle has traditionally been that of nurturer and caretaker. Yet, herein lies the

paradox. "for the very traits that traditionally have defined the 'goodness' of women. are those that mark them as deficient in moral development" (Gilligan, p. 18). The principle on which she bases her argument is that. rather than viewing the moral decision making behavior of women as deficient. it is better viewed as coming from a different orientation. In other words, womens construction of a moral problem as an issue of care or responsibility to others underlies a logic that contrasts with the logic of fairness that informs the justice approach (Gilligan, p. 73). She labeled the orientation from which women tend to operate, the ethic of care. Its counterorientation. the ethic of justice, is that which is predominantly utilized by men (Gilligan. 1979).

As intuitively plausible as her theories may be. Gilligan's methodology has been critiqued and the credibility of her results has been questioned due to questionable empirical methodology by many researchers (Brabek, 1983. Broughton, 1983. Code. 1983. Green 1986. Kerber. 1986. Luria. 1986. Nails. 1983. Pratt & Royer, 1982). A small sample size. selective reporting of data. an absence of descriptive data. and a selective sample are just some of the problems with her work. Thus. Gilligan has suggested the existence of significant sex differences while failing to empirically support her claims with detailed quantitative research. This issue has been the catalyst of numerous studies that attempted to identify sex differences while maintaining experimental credibility (Lyons. 1982. Lyons. 1983. Ford & Lowery. 1986. Pratt & Rover 1982). Few of these studies. with the exception of Lyons (1982 & 1983). have found significant sex differences with regard to the use of care and justice orientations. These mixed results strongly suggest that the issue cannot simply be whether or not sex differences exist in moral decision making. but rather under what circumstances they exist. It is the latter issue which is of a more complex nature.

Ford and Lowery (1986) investigated Gilligan's hypotheses in a study where subjects, both men and women, were asked to fill out a self-report questionnaire on moral dilemmas they had actually experienced. Subjects first described the dilemma, then rated its importance in their lives, and finally how difficult it was to come to a resolution. Subjects then rated their own use of both justice and care orientations based on paragraphs they were given to read by the experimenter describing each ethic. There are several noteworthy findings and aspects of this work. The first is that no overall significant sex differences were observed with regard to a predominance of the ethic of care or justice. Secondly, women were found be more consistent in their consideration of the ethic of care across a variety of conflicts while men were found to be more consistent in their use of the ethic of justice. More importantly though, their results showed that the importance of the conflict in the subjects' lives and the difficulty of decision were in fact significantly associated with care ratings but not with justice ratings. It seems that the more important and difficult moral decisions are, for both men and women, the more likely one is to respond from this caring perspective.

The pitfall of this study is in the reliability of the methods. Instead of providing a similar set of scenarios as stimuli, subjects were asked to supply their own stimuli by describing a moral dilemma that they had been in and then asked to read descriptions of the concepts of the ethic of care and the ethic of justice. There are several problems with this type of method. One is that men and women may respond very differently in terms of what constitutes an individual's moral dilemma. To offer an exaggerated example, if a woman considers an abortion decision to be her moral dilemma, necessarily embedded within this issue is the choice between concern for oneself or concern for others (i.e. husband, family). The ethic of care is interwoven in

this decision. By the same token, if a man considers whether to keep a $50 bill he found to be his moral dilemma, the decision involves less of a care issue and more of a fairness issue. The point being made is that there was little stimulus control with this type of method, and any differences in the dilemmas stated by males and females were not taken into account.

In addition, by giving subjects a description of each mode of morality and asking them to rate their own use of each, ones results may be susceptible to demand characteristics and the failure to note any other distinct types of morality from which a person might base a decision.

As Ford & Lowery (1986) suggest, to sort out the influence of content of the dilemmas and concentrate on the issue of subject utilization of care and justice issues, it is necessary to present the same dilemmas to each subject. These would need to be equated on the extent to which the content is embedded in justice or care contexts. It is this notion on which the present study is based.

The current study attempts to determine whether in a given conflict situation, females would be more apt than males to focus on issues of responsibility and care while males would be more apt than females to focus on issues of rights and justice. This was investigated using scenarios depicting moral dilemmas, designed by the primary researcher, which varied in level of importance. The levels of importance, high and low, were defined in terms of the level of personal involvement of a subject in each situation. By using a free-response method of responding to each dilemma it was expected that subjects could list determinants of their behavior without being influenced by any previously dictated choices of responding.

Based on Gilligan's theory, it was predicted that in situations of low importance and of little difficulty, men may indeed tend to rely on a justice orientation more

than would women. Likewise, it was expected that in the same situation women indeed tend to rely on a care orientation. However, in situations of greater importance and difficulty, no sex differences are expected for either orientation. Based on Ford & Lowery's (1986) results, it is hypothesized that men and women tend to be equally as caring in situations in which they are involved very personally.

Method

Subjects

Seventy-nine research participants (40 men & 39 women) from The University of Iowa volunteered to participate in this experiment as part of a requirement for an undergraduate introduction to psychology course. Their ages ranged from 18 years to 32 years (the median age was 20). Twelve was the maximum number of participants who were tested together at any one time.

Procedure

The within-subject part of the design of this experiment required each of the participants to respond to a ten-page booklet containing ten moral dilemmas designed by the first author. Four things were requested of each participant after he/she carefully read each scenario. Participants were asked to briefly describe what their action would be in response to each dilemma, then asked to list any factors or considerations they used in making their decision, and finally to rate the level of importance of each decision and the degree of difficulty in making each decision. The importance and degree of difficulty of decision were rated on eleven-point scales that were anchored

on each end with the descriptors, very important/difficult and not important/difficult at all.

Scenario importance was manipulated in the following way. Each of the scenarios was placed into one of two categories: high level of importance or low level of importance. The high importance category included premarital or marital-family situations and the low importance category included situations involving friendship or strangers. For example, one of the lesser important dilemmas was deciding whether or not to tell a waitress who undercharges the bill about the error which is in your favor. An example of the highly important dilemmas was one that asked whether or not one would leave their significant other to take a job offer.

One of the dilemmas was Kohlberg's famous "Heinz Dilemma" which has been used by Gilligan (1979, 1982) as well as other researchers in classic moral decision making studies. This dilemma involves deciding whether or not to steal a life-saving drug for a dying spouse. The authors' decision to use it arose from the reputation it has gained as a serious moral dilemma, which made it an appropriate scenario to be used in the present study.

Results

In analyzing the data, the responses made concerning the action each participant would take in the given situation were intentionally left out of the coding process since the scope of this study was the investigation of how people make decisions, not what they specifically decide. In addition, in many of these situations individuals could react the same way for very different reasons. The specific reaction was expected only to confound the results if included.

The way in which individual responses were coded was in accordance with the criteria determined by Lyons (1982), a graduate student of Gilligan, who devised a system of quantifying decisions as coming from care and justice orientations. This procedure was selected to maintain methodological consistency with previous studies that used content analyses and thus facilitate comparisions. Lyons (1982) had determined "care" responses as coming from any of five perspectives: not wanting to hurt others, wanting to maintain a relationship, saving others from physical or emotional hurt, considering the situation over the principle, and considering others in the others contexts (empathy). "Justice" responses were determined to come from one of five perspectives: concern for self above others; consideration of rights, duty, or obligation; concern for principle over situation; concern to treat others as you would like to be treated; and seeing others in one's own context. With strict adherence to this structure, responses were coded and classified into care and justice responses, or other responses (based on another orientation, or irrelevant responses.) Two independent raters were trained in the content analysis and classified the responses accordingly. The raters agreed on the classifications 93% of the time. On the few times that the raters disagreed, their responses were averaged together. These classifications were used to determine the percentage of care and justice responses in each dilemma and these were used to compute the overall mean percent of care and justice responses in the high and low importance situations. The overall mean percentages are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Four separate 2 x 2 analyses of variance (ANOVAS) were conducted to assess the effects of sex and level of importance of the dilemma on four separate dependent measures: perceived level of importance, degree of difficulty of decision, mean percentage of care responses, and mean percentage of justice responses. The first test conducted was a manipulation check which was used to ascertain that subjects were actually perceiving the designated high importance scenarios as being of higher importance than the designated low importance scenarios. The means were significantly different, in the direction that was expected, $F(1,77)= 130.78$ $p<.0001$ and no main effect of sex, $F(1,77)=1.01$ $p=.317$ nor sex by importance level interaction, $F(1,77)=.05$ $p=.832$ was observed in perception of importance.

With regard to ratings of difficulty in making the decision, once again this was measured to see whether the designated high importance dilemma decisions were more difficult to make than the low importance dilemma decisions. This was affirmed: choices based on dilemmas of high importance were perceived as more difficult to make than those of low importance. $F(1,77)= 42.58$ $p<.0001$. Again, no main effect of sex, $F(1,77)=.05$ $p=.816$ nor interaction of sex by importance, $F(1,77)=2.23$ $p=.140$ was observed in ratings of difficulty.

One main focus of this study was to establish the existence of the ethics of care and justice, as postulated by Gilligan (1979, 1980), and to investigate whether there existed a tendency for predominant use of care in women and justice in men. The prediction that a sex difference existed in the care responses, but only at levels of low importance was not supported by the statistical tests which revealed a nonsignificant effect of sex on the "percent care" measure, $F(1,77)=1.21$ $p=.274$ and a nonsignificant sex by importance interaction, $F(1,77)=1.95$ $p=.166$. The results do show, however, a

main effect of importance on the percentage care variable. Both men and women used significantly higher percentages of care responses at the high level of importance than they did at the low importance level. $F(1,77) = 25.05$ $p<.0001$. This supports the hypothesis that men and women utilize the same amount of care responses in highly important, difficult decisions.

Equally as interesting are the results of the analysis examining the percentage of justice responses coming from men and women in high versus low importance dilemmas. There was a highly reliable difference between the percentages of justice responses for men and women combined at the high versus the low level of importance, with higher percentages of justice responses being found in less important dilemmas and lower justice percentages being found in highly important dilemmas. $F(1,77)=44.32$ $p<.0001$. More importantly, an interaction between sex and importance was found, $F(1,77)=18.62$ $p<.0001$. Follow-up t-tests revealed that in high importance situations, women responded with higher percentages of justice than men, $t(77)=2.858$ $p<.01$, and in low importance situations, men were responding with higher percentages of justice than women, $t(77)= 2.196$ $p<.05$. This final finding is one that is surprising and provocative, as it contrasts directly with Gilligans theory and with the trend of results from studies that reported sex differences.

Discussion

The aforementioned results have supported Gilligan's notion that two ethics of moral decision making behavior can be distinguished. However, it is less clear under what circumstances they are sex– characteristic. The hypothesis that in dilemmas of high importance and difficulty women and men would respond more predominantly from a

care orientation was supported by the fact that in high importance scenarios "percent care" was greater than "percent justice". The lack of a sex difference on this measure casts serious doubt on the claim that women tend to respond more from a care orientation than men, at least in situations of high personal involvement (Gilligan, 1982). Thus, the assumed differences in socialization used to explain why one sex would have cared more about the welfare of others, especially those who are close to them, were not supported. In fact, this study failed to find any indication that women are more caring than men, as intuitively believable as the notion may be. In both low importance and high importance dilemmas, men and women did not differ in percentages of caring responses.

The prediction that in situations of low importance and difficulty, men would tend to rely on the justice orientation more than women in the same situation, was supported. This can be interpreted to mean that in moral dilemmas where friends or acquaintances are involved, and not spouses or families, that men tend to respond in a manner that is fairest to everyone involved, including themselves. Conversely, in the same situation, women, while not responding more caringly than men, also do not tend to rely on justice orientation to the extent that men do. This fact lends support to Gilligan's theory, but only as it is considered in terms of situations of low importance.

The most provocative finding, that in situations of high importance, women were found to respond more from a justice orientation than men, is worthy of considerable note. This finding is contradictory to the trend that is usually observed in moral judgment research. It also is inconsistent with previous research which reported that women tend not to rely on the ethic of justice to the overall extent that men do. It is difficult to satisfactorily explain this finding. It is possible that in situations of high importance, women may have been more concerned with justifying their responses

in such a way that their reasoning would seem at least as logical and acceptable as it did caring. This may have been an attempt to overcompensate for reasoning they perceived to be overly emotional. The explanation of such a need to do so may be found in the way in which moral-development psychologists have traditionally equated empathic, emotional responses with illogical, less "mature" responses. The result is almost paradoxical. Women, in an attempt to be perceived as less emotional, or empathic, are perceived as being more logical (as defined by the ethic of justice) than men. The men may never have felt such an obligation since male reasoning has traditionally been stereotyped as logical and mature. Or, perhaps college women of today are being taught to include themselves as one of those needing to be cared for, which contrasts with the traditional notion of "selfless care." Only future research can test the appropriateness of these claims.

Thus, it seems fair to say that perhaps these orientations are not as sex-predominant as Gilligan (1982) has claimed them to be. She states in her introduction to In a Different Voice, that the orientations she describes are not characterized by gender but by theme. However, she claims to have traced the existence of the ethic of care primarily through women voices (Gilligan, 1982,). Even if this was true, it is erroneous to have assumed that women were not socialized to use the justice mode, and likewise to assume that men were not encouraged to care. It is more plausible to define these orientations as existing, but being very situation specific. This would provide even further insight into the seemingly inconsistent behavior of women with regard to the justice orientation found in this study.

This study has contributed to the moral judgment research in several ways. The use of multiple, common moral dilemmas as stimuli for the sample of subjects is an important methodological procedure that has been lacking in much of the previous

research. The theory of two distinguishable ethics of moral reasoning has also been supported. The findings of this study elucidate the situation-specificity of these ethics. Moreover, the results have identified importance of situation as being at least one of the relevant dimensions that elicits differences in responding. This study was designed to directly investigate the complexities of sex differences in moral decision-making. However, due to the wide methodological differences that exist in this field of study, even the research directly aimed at assessing documented sex differences are difficult to compare, as sample characteristics and size differ, as do instruments used to measure a sample's morality. (Brabek, 1983, p. 280). Thus, future research on the existence of sex differences in moral judgment and decision making must also focus its attention on situational differences and how they affect the decision making of both men and women. The issue is clearly more complicated than researchers have made it out to be, by looking at overall usages of care and justice orientations without regard for differences that exist in the stimuli themselves. Only after issues such as these have fully been investigated can one begin an adequate inquiry about the nature of morality.

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Author's Notes

This paper was presented at the Midwest Psychological Association Conference, May 1989. Scenarios, along with respective mean ratings of importance, are available upon request from the first author.

TABLE 1

Means and Standard Deviations (in parentheses) for each dependent variable, in high and low importance categories, by sex

	men	women
HIGH	9.025 (1.472)	9.353 (1.251)
LOW	6.928 (1.879)	7.175 (1.379)

Importance ratings
1=not important 11=very important

	men	women
HIGH	5.900 (1.954)	6.276 (1.874)
LOW	7.519 (1.477)	7.305 (1.332)

Difficulty ratings
1=very difficult 11=not difficult

	men	women
HIGH	42.537 (14.217)	41.814 (15.198)
LOW	31.033 (12.891)	34.603 (10.716)

Percentage of Care Responses

	men	women
HIGH	26.646 (15.250)	36.635 (15.417)
LOW	48.670 (14.733)	41.906 (12.215)

Percentage of Justice Responses